THE WASHINGTON MONTHLY
Sept 1972

Let Them Eat Bombs

STATINTL

by John Everingham

Author's Note: *From March, 1968, to May, 1972, I made seven treks to the jungled villages of Long Pot District in north central Laos. The district is located approximately 32 miles to the northwest of Long Cheng, headquarters for General Vang Pao's American-trained army, and 30 air miles to the southwest of the now deserted Plain of Jars.*

In 1968, Long Pot was made up of slightly less than 2,000 people living in 11 separate villages. Five of these were populated by the Meo clan, five by the Hill Lao, and one by the people of the Mekong River lowlands. Long Pot is the name of the district and also the name of the Meo village serving as district headquarters.

It was a three-day walk to Long Pot village from the nearest motor road. When I first arrived, I saw clusters of thatch and bamboo houses gripping the sides of a man-scraped ridge. The cries of small children scampering on the rust-colored clay mingled with the grunts and squeals of fat pigs rooting in the underbrush. It was a peaceful scene.

I was shown to the home of the district chief. He was a short, vigorous man in his late fifties, with a high forehead and the melancholy dignity of a senior statesman. Gair Su Yang wore loose black pants of traditional Meo cut and a U. S. military fatigue jacket; he wore no shoes.

According to Gair Su Yang, the first helicopter landed in Long Pot in 1960. The pilots were American, but a Meo officer climbed out to talk with him. The officer spoke of an alliance between the Americans and a Meo colonel of the Royal Lao Army named Vang Pao. He said that American officials had made a pact with Vang Pao; promising to build for the Meo their own army and independent state in the mountains. They guaranteed that the tribesman would not fall under the control of either faction of lowland Lao then girding for civil war. The officer painted a picture of future prosperity for the Meo. All they had to do was become anti-communist, helping the Americans to fight the Pathet Lao revolutionaries controlling sections of Laos' northern provinces.

One of the problems that the people of Long Pot had in accepting the deal was that they were not sure who Vang Pao was. But there was a more basic problem—though Gair Su Yang did not inform me of it until sometime later: "If we joined the alliance, the Pathet Lao would have become our enemy and would have threatened our village.... I told him that Long Pot would not join Vang Pao and the Americans." According to Gair Su Yang, the officer then became angry and threatened that Vang Pao and the Americans considered those not friends to be enemies, and "enemy villages would be attacked and captured by Vang Pao's men."

"We couldn't do anything," Gair Su Yang later contended, pointing out that only fear of a helicopter-load of soldiers descending upon Long Pot forced him to accept involvement in the war venture.

By the end of 1960, every man in Long Pot village had received an M-1 rifle or carbine. Many had been flown to Long Cheng for three to four months' training by U. S. soldiers. (These were probably U. S. Special Forces, whom it was common to see in small up-country towns of Laos until 1968-69. Thereafter CIA "civilians" were used to train Vang Pao's army.) Long Pot's men were then given rank in irregular battalion 209.

Long Pot had been militarized in defense of "Meoland" nearly eight years when I first visited. It had not, however, gone to war. The M-1s were used for shooting squirrels and birds. Men, women, and children slashed, burned, and planted to reap harvests of rice, corn, and, of course, the opium poppy. Opium was the main cash crop, which from 1960 onwards had been bought by Meo soldiers and transported both by pony caravan and American-piloted Air America helicopters from Long Cheng.

October, 1970

During the summer of 1969, the Bureau of Public Roads, Laos Division (an arm of USAID), opened war-abandoned Route 13 linking the administrative capital of Vientiane with the royal capital at Luang Prabang. The new road put Long Pot only a half-day walk from motor transport. A companion and myself traveled up Route 13 by motorcycle and walked the rest of the way to Long Pot village. As we arrived, 20 teenage boys in U. S. army uniforms, dragging M-1 carbines and rifles often too big for them, paced through mock-military maneuvers, periodically diving to the ground in a half-hearted manner that would have gotten them killed if bullets had really been flying. A few days earlier, they had returned by helicopter from Long Cheng. There, they said, U. S. soldiers had put them through three months of military training. Another helicopter would arrive that afternoon, they said, and take them off to Moung Soui district, about 30 miles to the northeast, where the Pathet Lao were in the midst of attacking and taking the town.

The boys' eyes revealed their fear and demoralization as they talked about the coming helicopter ride and their destination. And as we all waited, bombs could be heard peppering the hills in the distance, in the direction of Moung Soui. The bomb blasts, though 15 to 20 miles away, shook the hill under our feet and shattered the young soldiers' nerve. Several mothers were crying as they fussed over their soldier-boys; lucky charms were stuffed into baggy pockets. District Chief Gair Su Yang was at the center of the gathering handing out new U. S. army uniforms, pep-talking his recruits. But Gair Su Yang's voice was flecked with anger and did nothing to ease the funereal atmosphere.

No, said every boy I asked, they didn't want to go to fight the Pathet Lao. They said their village headmen had chosen them; they must go. And they went. Early next morning, I ran out from breakfast in Gair Su Yang's house as a helicopter finally whoop-whooped in to land. "Air America" was clearly printed down the side of the silver and blue craft. Boys clambered aboard. The helicopter rose and swept away toward Moung Soui. In three swift trips, 20 village boys were gone. None ever saw home again—except for one. His body was returned for burial 12 months later.

Tong Ouie is a village of Hill Lao people about an hour's walk from Long Pot village. The Hill Lao are a less prosperous, less colorful race who share the mountains with the Meo. But such distinctions are obscured in khaki. Early in 1970, Long Cheng demanded men from Tong Ouie to boost the failing Meo forces. The headman recounted the story bitterly: he had first refused to send a single man up to Long Pot village to fill out the district's quota. "The Americans are crazy. So is Vang Pao. They send more and more men against the Pathet Lao each year and they all get killed. Why should our people fight and die for the Meo or the Americans?"

continued

John Everingham is a reporter for Dispatch News Service International. He is currently reporting from Laos, where he has been for the past three years.